Annotated Form E-1-A for Boston College Undergrad Program courses

Program: Undergraduate Philosophy Program

1) Have formal learning outcomes been developed? What are they? (What specific sets of skills and knowledge does the department expect its majors to have acquired before they graduate?)

The Philosophy major at Boston College is designed to ground students in the core classical issues of philosophy and to give them the ability to engage with significant areas of contemporary concern in ways that move forward our communal conversation and the path toward answers and solutions. The Philosophy major focuses and sharpens students’ abilities to critically evaluate arguments and issues, to understand the assumptions and backgrounds of contemporary views, practices, and controversies, with a view to enable them to use their insights and skills to contribute to dialogue, understanding, and positive action in their professions and communities, large and small. Philosophy majors engage with fundamental and contemporary issues by reflecting on the large questions of identity and relationship to others, to communities, and the divine in a way that gives them a richer and broader vision of what it means to live a full life.

The Philosophy major serves students with different interests and career paths through different concentrations or tracks (LINK): 1) “Systematic Philosophy” (designed for those who are considering graduate school in Philosophy), 2) “Science, Ethics, and Humanity” (intended especially for premeds, nursing students, biology, chemistry, physics, and psychology majors, environmental studies minors, students interested in public health, etc.), “Pre-law/ International Studies/ Public Policy” (intended especially for those majoring or minoring in international studies, political science, and/or students interested in careers in law, public service, politics), “Philosophy/Economics/Justice” (intended especially for students also studying economics, finance, and management), “Philosophy and Religion” (intended for students with second majors or minors in theology and/or those interested in exploring a vocation in the priesthood/ministry), “Faith, Peace, Justice” (intended for students in the “faith, peace and justice minor” who are also philosophy majors), “Philosophy and the Arts” (intended especially for students involved in the arts or the study of literature).

All students majoring in Philosophy will be able to demonstrate

- knowledge of major texts and thinkers in at least 2 of the major periods in the history of Western philosophy
- an ability to read and interpret philosophical texts
- an ability to evaluate philosophical arguments
- understanding of such philosophical issues as the nature and scope of human knowledge, the meaning of human personhood, the good life and moral obligation, the social and political dimensions of human existence, the relationship of faith and reason, and the existence and nature of God, especially those connected with their track
- understanding of the difference between philosophical and other types of claims, e.g., historical, scientific (both natural and social sciences), theological, political, etc., especially those most connected to their track
• an ability to use philosophical resources to engage with contemporary issues and problems, especially those most connected with their track

2) Where are these learning outcomes published? Be specific. (Where are the department’s learning expectations accessible to potential majors: on the web or in the catalog or in your department’s major handouts?)

These goals will be posted on the department web site by September 2016. They have just been formalized by the undergraduate committee in spring 2016.

3) Other than GPA, what data/evidence is used to determine whether graduates have achieved the stated outcomes for the degree? (What evidence and analytical approaches do you use to assess which of the student learning outcomes are being achieved more or less well?)

A. In 2015 we assessed our Senior Honors Program using both indirect evidence (directly asking students how well they thought the course achieved specific objectives) and direct evidence (student work).

Indirect evidence: Students in the course were asked in the spring semester to answer the following questions, with the option to choose strongly disagree—strongly agree on a five point scale, as well as to offer qualitative comments.

The senior thesis helped me to engage in substantial independent research in the field of philosophy.
Four of nine students responded. All four checked “strongly agree.”

The senior thesis allowed me to engage with the best of current scholarship in my area of interest.
Four of nine students responded. Three checked agree and one checked strongly agree for an average score of 4.25

The senior thesis program allowed me to be part of an intellectual community of peers which enhanced my own work and allowed me to share my work with others.
Four of nine students responded. Two chose agree and two chose strongly agree for an average score of 4.5

Students’ comments were positive and varied with no strong pattern of suggestion. Due to the small number of respondents, the best evaluation of the data is that students themselves think they learned a great deal through the process of writing the thesis.

Direct student work: Four senior theses (out of a total of nine written) were read by faculty (who were not the direct faculty advisor for the thesis). The theses were evaluated according to the following questions.

1. Did the student’s work reflect substantial independent research?
2. Did the student’s work reflect engagement with the best of current scholarship and an intellectual community of scholars?

3. Did the student’s work reflect exploration and/or creative engagement with a central problem or figure in philosophy?

One thesis evaluator summed up his conclusions in the following way: “The evidence from these two documents strongly suggests that the honors program in philosophy is meeting its goals as measured by the questions above. One suggestion for the future might be that students be formally required to proofread their thesis twice before submission. I encountered a few typos and transpositions as well as some minor errors in punctuation, grammar, and usage in Thesis B. I also noticed a difference in the overall quality of the two theses. This kind of difference is probably to some extent unavoidable, given the differences in the experiences and the native capacities of each student. I wonder, however, if the imposition of additional requirements in the initial screening process for the program might achieve a more uniform level of quality? For example, students might be required to submit a writing sample as part of the application process. Or they might be required to submit the scores achieved on the verbal portion of the SAT/ACT that were used in their application to Boston College. These are, of course, only suggestions, and there may be a more effective way to approach this issue.”

A second evaluator wrote of one thesis “more back-and-forth between views you don't agree with, more consideration of opposing positions, and more arguments for one's own philosophical commitments,” and suggested that the author did a good job of applying an idea to a particular ethical problem (treatment of animals) without doing sufficient criticism of the larger theory of utilitarianism itself. He also wrote of a second thesis “I think there is room for improvement in terms of engaging an "current scholarship and an intellectual community of scholars". What about those scholars who might disagree, or offer contrasting viewpoints” and found this thesis too wide ranging in its topic while also writing that the student’s work was “quite impressive. She has clearly done a great deal of independent research.”

B. This spring we developed assessment criteria for our history sequence of courses:

PHIL 4405 Greek Philosophy (offered every fall)
PHIL 4406 Modern Philosophy (offered every fall)
PHIL 4407 Medieval Philosophy (offered every spring)
PHIL 4408 19th Century Philosophy (offered every spring)

Indirect evidence: Students in Medieval Philosophy and 19th C. Philosophy were asked in the spring semester to answer the following questions, with the option to choose strongly disagree – strongly agree on a five point scale, as well as to offer qualitative comments.

1. Did this course help you to understand, compare, and contrast the positions of philosophers in this period? Please feel free to comment.

2. Did this course help you understand the philosophers and their ideas in the historical context? Please feel free to comment.
beyond the particular years in which they were formed, e.g., in relation to previous or subsequent periods and/or as having influenced our culture in general?

We have not yet received the results of that survey, and we will combine the results of this spring from Medieval and 19th/20th c. Philosophy with surveys of the Fall history sequence courses, Ancient and Modern Philosophy.

Direct evidence: Next year we will have one assignment from one of the courses each semester evaluated by faculty (who are not teachers in this history sequence) based on the following questions:

1. Does the students’ work show ability to understand, compare and contrast the positions of philosophers in this period?
2. Does the students’ work show understanding of the philosophers and their ideas in historical context?
3. Does the students’ work show understanding of the significance of the views and debates of this period beyond this period?

4) Who interprets the evidence? What is the process? (Who in the department is responsible for interpreting the data and making recommendations for curriculum or assignment changes if appropriate? When does this occur?)

A. Two designated faculty volunteers conducted the evaluative work in May of 2015 and then reported their findings to the Director of Undergraduate Studies who also communicated this information to the chair and undergraduate committee. After examining the evidence, the DUS passed on this information to the next teacher of the Senior Honors seminar in June, so that suggestions could be incorporated into the next fall’s semester course that guides students in their initial writing of the thesis.

B. The plan is to develop a workshop day for faculty teaching in the history sequence to look at the evidence (direct and indirect) and come up with any suggestions for the sequence, in individual courses or as a whole.